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Developing Computer-based Activities to Teach and Test Listening and Speaking Skills in English

Introduction

As technology advances, the role of teachers to deliver and facilitate learning for their expectant 'techno savvy' students is to be in sync with existing and emerging technologies. Language teaching has utilized technologies of the day from slate to the paper and pencil, to tapes, to slides, to videos, etc. However, technology has not been explored to a great extent. The proposed study will try to explore innovative methods of teaching of the listening and speaking skills in English effectively and assessing the performance of students through computer-based activities as technology-based teaching materials.

Justification for selecting this topic

It is common and accepted knowledge that the dexterous learning of language cannot be a non-interactive process. Over the past years it has been noticed in various studies conducted that languages are most easily adapted to when the learner understands basic phonetics and dialectics of language through listening and speaking. Using technology in the process of teaching and learning plays an important role.

During the past two decades, together with path-breaking technological advances, computer network technology is now exerting its influence on various aspects including business, economics and education as well. Under such circumstances, using a computer has become of interest not only in IT classrooms but also in teaching, learning and testing of language skills. The role of computers in language instruction today has become an important issue involving language teachers all over the world.

Considering computers as facilitators in teaching, the western world has already adopted computer tools in classrooms and is exploiting technology to the fullest. In the Indian context, we now need to incorporate computing tools into our classrooms, or we could perhaps become old fashioned.

Technology has changed methods of teaching to a large extent. To cite a few examples - students can have real life situations through a computer; even if a teacher is on leave, the class is still on through self-study material; independent learning at an individual's own pace is possible; 100% learning takes place as the system or a programme does not allow a candidate to go ahead. Thus, the use of computers in educational settings has increased dramatically. Meanwhile, the application of CALL (Computer Assisted Language Learning) is experiencing a renaissance in a modern language teaching and learning arena, and growing in popularity. The use of ICT (Information and Communication Technology) has widened the facility of English language teaching in a classroom as well as in a digital language laboratory. This development has given educators an opportunity to think of different activities to be used, in addition to utilizing the traditional blackboards, chalks, markers and dusters. It is high time as teachers we take a close look at existing technology based systems of teaching and testing of language skills.

The present study proposes to investigate effects of such computer-based activities on learners.

Hypothesis

Computer-based activities are motivating and have greater potential in imparting excellent training and testing students' actual level of comprehension and proficiency in language skills.

Aims and objectives

This research will enquire into current developments in Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) and assess difficulties faced by teachers in imparting quality education and specially use these developments to teach listening and speaking skills effectively and help them assess or test students' performance effectively. The study will be carried out at English Language Teaching Institute of Symbiosis (ELTIS) with a group of international students of the 'Diploma of Proficiency in English and Career Skills' programme as EFL (English as a foreign language) learners and with a group of Indian students as ESL (English as a second language) learners. This research examines the potential of computer based activities as teaching as well as testing devices and especially discusses ways by which oral-aural skills can be not only be developed but also tested.

This research also aims at designing innovative methods used in the administering of and the teaching and testing of oral-aural skills in English. It makes an attempt to bring out its positive and negative points on the basis of data available. One of the objectives is to produce a sample teaching and testing model for judging communicative performances with special reference to oral-aural skills in English.

Research questions

a) Why do we need to integrate computer-based activities in the teaching and testing of language skills?

b) How would it be beneficial to ESL (English as a second language) and EFL (English as a foreign language) learners?

c) How can we develop and make the best use of them? What do learners think about them?

d) How would they help enhance the skills/abilities of a teacher to facilitate learning?

Scope and limitations of the present study

There are some common problems faced by English teachers such as students from different backgrounds, difficulty in constantly monitoring individuals, creating individual lesson plans for students, motivating students for improvement. As an example, classes at English Language Teaching Institute of Symbiosis (ELTIS) constitute a mixture of learners drawn from diverse linguistic, socio-cultural and regional backgrounds. They possess varying degree of English language competence depending upon the medium of instruction in school in their respective countries and their level of interaction with the language. However, their acquaintance with the use of computers is more satisfactory. This acquaintanceship can therefore be utilized in order to better train them in language skills.

The outcome of this research will offer solutions to these problems by allowing:

- better lesson planning
- improving communications with students through different resources
- better teaching methods with interactive teaching tools
- reviewing student performances quickly and accurately and so on.

From a practical perspective, testing is a critical area in language education as results of testing often influence the future of learners, the professional evaluation of instructors and the direction of curriculum design. 'How much' (the level) of the skill that has been acquired by a learner needs to be tested. This research will also take into consideration the following:

- Creating effective computer based tests (CBTs)
- Assigning time for tests
- Creating 6-8 types of questions in a single exam sheet
- Randomizing questions go generate different sets of question papers
- Creating customized materials for classroom evaluation and so on.

This research does not intend to revisit details of Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL); Technology Enhanced Language Learning (TELL), etc. on which a lot of work has

already been undertaken. However, it intends to find innovative methods in the teaching and the testing of listening and speaking skills with reference to recent developments in computer technology.

This study does not take into consideration all the four language skills.

Training and Preparation

Teaching: The researcher has been teaching English for the past three years and supported technological developments at ELTIS. The researcher has also conducted a teacher-training programme on 'Integration of technology in teaching English, with special focus on the use of digital language laboratories". Some of the experiments conducted during this programme proved to be very useful for the learners, and an attempt would be made in this study to design some innovative computer-based activities so as to make learning an enjoyable and enriching experience for students.

Testing: The researcher has led an initiative of online testing such as a Test of English for Job-readiness (TEJ) and Corporate English Language Scan (CELS), online language proficiency tests.

The researcher is aware that computers have opened up many possibilities unheard of in previous eras. But these technologies will have only limited impact if the pedagogy behind their application does not keep pace. Technology, therefore, is not a substitute to teachers but an aid to teaching.

Methodology

This research will approach the problems from learners' and teachers' levels through a survey in which current trends of teaching and testing will be studied. Lacunae in the process of teaching and testing will be identified.

This research will employ both structured and unstructured interviews, participant observations and lessons in a language laboratory. Problems faced by learners and teachers will be identified. Computer-based activities will be introduced and learners' responses will

be studied to check if there is any change in the levels of proficiency. Pre-test and post-test will also be designed and conducted.

It will also gather data from secondary sources like books, articles, etc. in addition to the use of questionnaires based on a standard format to obtain mainly qualitative response from learners, teachers, accompanied with interviews.

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